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ABSTRACT

This brief presents two articles. The first discusses ways that schools are working to strengthen language learning for English language learners (ELLs), noting that as the population of ELLs is growing, school districts are scrambling for resources and trying to find the best ways to place and educate such students. Despite limited resources, districts are encouraging English-as-a-Second-Language teachers to work with general educators to help them modify their content instruction and materials to better meet student needs in diverse classrooms. The brief discusses how to reduce anxiety among ELLs, how to recognize the difference between students with language difficulties and students with disabilities, and how to help ELLs through two-way immersion programs. Two sidebars discuss how ELLs will perform on high stakes tests in the wake of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and offer tips for assisting language learners. The second article describes how family literacy programs can help students and parents achieve, focusing on one program that provides a community-based service for families designed to support children's learning. Though parents and children have separate lessons, they also participate in shared activities to practice their language skills together. (SM)

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FALL 2002

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Acquiring English

Schools Seek Ways to Strengthen Language Learning

Professor Judith Lessow-Hurley of San Jose State University considers herself proficient in Spanish. Yet she was at a loss for words in trying to communicate to her Spanish-speaking butcher how she wanted frozen goat meat cut for a special dish. Similarly, when contracts written in Spanish arrived on her desk from El Salvador, Lessow-Hurley wasn't confident that she understood the precise meaning of the legalese. Adapting her vocabulary and using descriptive gestures resulted in the right cut of meat; the contracts, however, were dispatched to a professional translator.

Lessow-Hurley's experiences show that people understand and use language on a variety of levels. What works in academia may not work in business or in everyday life, she states. Imagine, then, the challenges facing students who struggle to master English for different purposes. A Spanish speaker born in the United States and a Russian immigrant may get along fine on the playground or at a fast-food restaurant, but their command of English may not be sufficient for them to fully comprehend school materials and class discussions or to take tests couched in academic language.

The designation "English language learner" (ELL) covers an enormous spectrum of students. In some districts, students represent more than 100 different languages, and their understanding of English can appear to have as many levels.

"English language learners come with different needs," says Deborah Short, of the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C., an organization that conducts research and training on English as a second language and foreign languages. According to Short, "More and more students coming to the United States have serious gaps in their educational background." These deficiencies may have resulted from multiple relocations caused by civil strife or war, or in the case of girls, living in countries where they were not allowed a formal education.

Between 1990 and 2000, the population of K–12 students learning English as a second language in U.S. public schools doubled from 2.2 million to 4.4 million, according to the Office of English Language Acquisition in the U.S. Department of Education. Yet, with the exception of Florida, New York, and California, states do not usually require preservice training in how to teach students whose primary language is not English.

Over the past decade, in addition to large U.S. cities, suburban and rural areas have welcomed an influx of immigrant students. As a result, school districts are scrambling for resources and trying to find the best ways to place and educate such students to ► continued on page 2

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ensure that they learn content while mastering a new language.

Growing Pains, Limited Resources

Many school districts, especially in the South and Midwest, are seeing increasing numbers of students with strong needs in English instruction—including immigrants and second-generation U.S. residents. The most immediate task for districts experiencing this growth has been to establish centers to register new students, test them to determine their English proficiency, and provide families with information.

Over the last eight years, the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County school system in central North Carolina has seen the number of English language learners increase from a handful of students to 8 percent of its 47,000-student population. Families settle in the Piedmont area, attracted by jobs in furniture making, food service, and construction.

After students complete English skills testing at the district's Newcomer Center for International Students, they are referred to appropriate English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, located in 27 of the district's 75 schools. In spite of the availability of these programs in more than a third of schools, some ELL parents still prefer to send their children to a neighborhood school that may not offer ESL instruction, notes George Fleetwood, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction.

This choice can have negative consequences, says Kathy Neal, Winston-Salem's lead ESL teacher for grades 1–5. When state tests begin in 3rd grade, "this unfortunately is when teachers have concerns. As a result, we have children who have missed the earliest, crucial years of ESL instruction," she explains.

The biggest challenge in the district in the last two years has been students who are literate in neither their native language nor English, says Neal. Although test modifications such as allowing questions to be read aloud may nudge some students into the passing range, a large number of ELLs will be retained at grades 3, 5, and 8, Neal says.

"The sad cases are that some of these children are so far behind that they just can't catch up," she notes. According to experts, the dropout rate of English language learners is high across the United States. For example, the dropout rate of Hispanic students—who represent nearly three-quarters of all ELLs—is 28 percent, compared to an overall national dropout rate of 11 percent, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

To confront the problem head on, during the 2002–03 school year, Winston-Salem/Forsyth schools will pilot the use of the Wilson Reading System. This program, originally developed to teach adults with dyslexia to read, focuses on developing phonological skills for decoding English. "We're excited about using it. I'm just really hoping it has the success it's reported to have," says Neal.

Other school-based initiatives include starting sheltered English programs to support Spanish speakers in kindergarten and 1st grade with an English-speaking

teacher and a bilingual assistant. In the fall, the magnet Newcomer Academy will help middle school and high school students build English literacy skills from the ground up, starting with the alphabet.

Winston-Salem serves ESL students representing 52 different native languages, although most speak Spanish as their first language. But a shortage of Spanish-English bilingual teachers and limited ESL resources hinder efforts to implement programs to help these students, says Fleetwood. Most students receive ESL instruction in a daily pullout class and attend regular subject classes at the appropriate grade level.

"The goal of ESL is to have these students function in a regular classroom as quickly as possible," says Fleetwood.

Because North Carolina tests students in reading and math from grades 3 through 8, with writing tests also mandated for grades 4 and 7, there's "some consternation" about how students with limited English will perform. While beginning students may be exempt from testing

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for up to two years, there's still "a real incentive to have the children be successful in our accountability system within two to three years," Fleetwood says.

In suburban Minneapolis, the Osseo Area Schools are facing a similar situation, as the population of ELLs (including Somali, Hmong, and Russian immigrants) has steadily increased over the last 10 years.

Because of a budget squeeze, the district will freeze the number of ESL staff, even though class sizes will increase. "We won't be able to provide the individual attention that English learners might need," says Superintendent Chris Richardson.

Still, state funds have helped finance a new Cultural Integration Center at Osseo's Zanewood Elementary School that provides language assessment, community information, and recreation programs. And the district's three high schools have made an effort to reduce the dropout rate of ELL students by allowing them to retake basic state exit exams in reading, math, and writing, Richardson adds.

Easing Content Delivery

Despite limited resources, districts are encouraging ESL teachers to work with general education teachers to help them modify their content instruction and materials to better meet student needs in diverse classrooms.

For example, Winston-Salem teachers are encouraged to write instructions on the board and use visuals or gestures when introducing new vocabulary. ► continued on page 6

Leaving No English Language Learners Behind

In the wake of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, educators are worried about how students struggling with English will perform on high-stakes tests.

The law, which is the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, calls for establishing "adequate yearly progress" targets for student achievement in reading and math. Schools that don't show progress over two consecutive years will face a range of consequences. These can include setting up a school improvement plan, replacing staff, restructuring the school, or expanding parents' school choice options.

To ensure accountability for all students, schools will report achievement scores for various student subgroups, to include limited English proficiency (LEP), race, ethnicity, language group, and disability. As a result, school administrators are seeking direction from their states and the federal government to determine the best ways to help English language learners (ELLs), whose lower test scores could push a school into the failing category.

States must establish their definition of "adequate yearly progress" by early 2003. Using 2001–02 test scores as a baseline, schools must improve yearly so that by 2013–14, all students are proficient in reading and math.

The law, while setting minimum standards, does give flexibility to the states to build on their existing accountability systems, according to U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige. (See his letter to educators at http://www.ed.gov/News/Letters/020724.html.)

Francisco Millet, director of the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program in Fairfax County, Va., says that under the county's current system, schools can exempt ESOL students from one year of assessments. So, elementary students exempted from testing at the 3rd grade level would not be tested until 5th grade, giving them time to improve their English skills. Under the new law, there will be no exemptions allowed in the 3rd, 5th, and 8th grades, says Millet.

Some fear that the accountability issue could pressure schools to focus too heavily on English language development instead of on content delivery, since students must take the tests in English. Donna Christian, president of the Center for Applied Linguistics, worries that "English only" will be emphasized over bilingual education. She is concerned that such an English-only focus will not allow adequate time for the transfer of content from the native language to English. "It could have long-term negative consequences, even though it might look better for test scores in the short term," says Christian.

But, according to Millet, states can develop alternative assessments to accommodate English language learners.

"The real question is, Will it be something that accurately measures what content they know? Standardized tests are designed to measure knowledge of content for an English monolingual student. When an ELL is given one of these tests, the test no longer measures knowledge of content but their abilities to manipulate the English language," Millet says. For example, a 3rd grade test taker might struggle with understanding the questions yet still have a grasp of the content.

"A fair test should be linguistically appropriate," he stresses.

"We hope the state will have something ready by spring 2003," Millet says. "The clock is ticking."

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Thinking Outside the Classroom

Family Literacy Programs Help Students and Parents Achieve

Parklawn Elementary School was in trouble. With low test scores and an economically disadvantaged student body—more than 50 percent of attending students qualify for free lunches—staff at the Title I school in Alexandria, Va., knew something had to be done. Unlike many school administrators facing difficult circumstances, however, Parklawn's leaders did not rush out to hire consultants, new teachers, or trainers when they received their grant funding.

Instead, they rented an apartment.

"We decided to apply the grant money we received to renting an apartment in the nearby Orleans Village apartment complex," says Harriet Sava, Parklawn's literacy coordinator. "Half of our students lived there, and most came from Central American or South American families with very little understanding of English."

What was needed most, officials decided, was a community-based service for families that "could support children's learning."

Parklawn's approach symbolizes the sort of outreach effort many schools now find necessary to help their immigrant students. In heavily multicultural areas, family illiteracy and language barriers frequently hamper efforts to provide a sound education. Compounding this problem is the fact that immigrant parents sometimes hesitate to approach school officials; they often feel intimidated due to their lack of English skills and their unfamiliarity with the school system.

"You really need to reach the parents," says Sava. "They're the primary teachers, and they can't function in American society without knowing the basic literacy skills they need to survive."

Learning Together

"Family literacy is families and children learning together," says Rebecca Roberts, a literacy practitioner from Hyattsville, Md. "It involves parents and children practicing exercises to help them learn to read and function."

Roberts previously worked with Even Start, a federally funded program designed to help disadvantaged families. "I saw many immigrant parents struggling with day-to-day issues because they lacked the necessary skills to provide a good life for their children," she says. Such challenges included difficulties accessing medical, legal, and child care services and assisting their children in learning English and reading skills.

To address these problems, family literacy programs first schedule time for parents and children to be taught separate lessons. Parents learn functional literacy skills that include filling out job applications, shopping for groceries, and gaining access to needed services. Children participate in reading exercises and expand their language skills via fun activities that include down-to-earth lessons such as singing songs about brushing teeth and "the dangers of jumping on the bed," according to Roberts.

After their separate lessons, parents and children participate in shared activities, practicing their language skills together. Learning together in this manner is particularly advantageous because "parents might be embarrassed to let anyone know if they don't know

something—colors and numbers, for instance," says Roberts. Through shared exercises, parents can learn practical skills right along with their children. "That makes it very special for them both," she adds.

Helping parents learn requires communicating with them effectively. Many schools draw their translators from a bilingual teacher pool; others depend on the assistance of community volunteers. In some instances, students may translate for their parents, but this is usually done only in informal discussions, according to sources. "We might have a student help with something minor like an introductory translation," says Kathy Nolan, literacy coordinator with Graham Road Elementary School in Falls Church, Va. "But we wouldn't have them acting as translators for something like a parent-teacher conference."

Concern about how their children are doing in school is often a strong motivator for parents. In fact, many do not attend English as a Second Language (ESL) courses until their children are already enrolled in school.

"Usually, adults come to our courses who have been working and can do their jobs, but now that their children are in school, they want to do more to help them," says Pat Bowyer, a family literacy specialist in Fairfax, Va. "They can't attend classes. They may have two jobs. They may not understand the school system. So what can they do to help?"

According to experts, many parents attempt to overcome language barriers by having friends or relatives who can act as translators accompany them during initial visits to schools and community centers. "Usually when people come to us, they bring a translator with them," says Mark Faloni, an Even Start family literacy instructor in Washington, D.C. "They might bring a relative, a friend, or a neighbor who can help."

Even if the translation is difficult, hand signals, charades, drawings, and photographs usually help bridge the divide. "We do whatever it takes," Faloni says.

Keeping the Ball Rolling

Despite the obvious value of such programs, many family literacy workers confess that the biggest challenges they face come not from their daily responsibilities but from the constant behind-the-scenes struggles to keep their programs alive.

"One of the most significant challenges for most family literacy programs is keeping them together," says David Red, who teaches English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) to adults in Falls Church, Va. "Program funds are usually scraped together from a variety of sources, and then they're gone after so many years."

Funding is only one obstacle. Other challenges include

- **Space.** Literacy programs need to be conveniently located for the families they are intended to assist—preferably within walking distance, because many immigrant parents do not drive or own cars.
- **Retention.** Program participants may not attend consistently and may drop out for reasons ranging from illness and pregnancy to apathy, anxiety, or the need to work additional hours at their jobs.
- **Staffing.** Staff members and volunteers must be willing to make long-term commitments to the program, according to outreach specialists. They must be prepared to work nonstandard and evening hours to accommodate parents who may work two jobs or who are not available during daytime business hours. They also have to be able to deal with limited success—their efforts will help some families, but they are not likely to reach all.

According to Red, cooperation among workers and local officials is the key to keeping outreach initiatives alive. "There needs to be a concerted effort to keep these kinds of programs operating," he says. "That's the way you're going to give people a successful education."

Rewards Worth the Struggle

Despite the multitude of challenges, most family literacy coordinators take enormous satisfaction in their work. "A lot of parents don't think that they can help their children [in school] if they don't speak English," says Betsy Lindeman Wong, an ESOL instructor in Fairfax, Va. "What makes me feel good is when they see that they can help and can learn themselves at the same time. That makes it worthwhile."

Graduates of such programs agree. "I came to this country from Guatemala in 1992," says Berta Perez, an Even Start graduate. "I did not speak English, but now I can help teach others who are just like me." She pauses. "Sometimes there's frustration, and I've had people tell me that I only do this sort of thing because it's easy for me—but I remind them that it's all about having a goal. It was hard for me to learn English when I first started, but if I can do it, so can they."

—JOHN FRANKLIN

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In the online version, see the list of Web resources on teaching English language learners.

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Some teachers assign English-speaking "buddies" to help English learners with classroom procedures. Teachers also draw on students' home cultures as they teach content, thereby increasing cross-cultural appreciation, says Claudette Jarrett, foreign language and ESL program manager with the Winston-Salem schools.

Teachers without ESL training can use a variety of approaches to meet English language learners where they are and help them over the hurdles of language acquisition—a process that takes years.

The best approaches to language development tie language to content, rather than teaching grammar, vocabulary, and spoken English in isolation, according to language experts. Mainstream teachers should use strategies that encourage students' English-speaking abilities by engaging their interest and not overcorrecting their mistakes.

"It's important to create contexts in which kids exchange meaningful messages. Kids like to talk to other kids, and that's useful," says Lessow-Hurley, author of an upcoming ASCD book on meeting the needs of K–12 second language learners. She suggests setting up groups in which ESL students work with English-speaking classmates on tasks that require cooperation.

"English will usually hold sway, since it is the 'power language.' As kids work on what they need to do and talk about it, the second language learners will acquire lots of language," Lessow-Hurley says.

Unfortunately, second language learners frequently get placed in lower-track classrooms because of their perceived inability to handle English. These classrooms rely heavily on individual work and question-and-answer formats, denying students the collaborative opportunities they need to improve their English skills, she says.

In sheltered instruction, teachers and students explore grade-level content in English using strategies that make it comprehensible to English language learners.

"A lot of what we call 'sheltering' is simply good instruction—all kids benefit from experiential learning, demonstrations, visuals, and routines. A lot of sheltering is also common sense—stay away from idioms, speak slowly and clearly, find ways to repeat yourself," Lessow-Hurley advises.

"It's easier to come up with strategies if you understand what a language is, how it functions, and how people learn languages," she adds. Research shows that learning a language to meet the demands of schooling takes a long time. Because receptive language skills—listening or reading for understanding—develop more quickly than productive language skills—speaking and writing—teachers shouldn't expect ELL students to express themselves fluently in English even when they've reached the point of understanding what they read and hear.

Lessow-Hurley also advises teachers to recognize the difference between academic language and language used for daily communication. She offers an example: a student may be able to talk about the causes of the American Civil War but may not understand an instruction to *list the factors* that led to the war.

Reducing Anxiety

When ELLs join content-area classes taught in English, teachers can do a lot to lower the anxiety level that new English speakers feel, according to Eleni Pappamihiel, professor of multilingual and multicultural education at Florida State University. Because of the "English-only" movement or a school's lack of resources, Pappamihiel notes, today's ELL students are being mainstreamed at earlier stages of English language acquisition than in the past.

"There's a lot of performance anxiety with these students, who are afraid teachers or peers will laugh at them," says Pappamihiel, who has researched the anxiety levels of middle school English language learners in Texas. The more a teacher knows about a student's English abilities, the better he can help the student overcome fears about speaking in class.

Teachers should be alert to student interactions. For example, in her study, Pappamihiel discovered that recent immigrants from Mexico were teased by more established Mexican American students, inhibiting their in-class participation. Yet mainstream teachers often lump students together without an awareness of the dynamics at work. This can increase tension and distract from learning, she says.

"A lot of teachers never ask [ELLs] 'What are you comfortable with?' or 'Who are you comfortable with?'" says Pappamihiel.

She also suggests that mainstream teachers allow students to consult with one another during activities.

For example, an intelligent student, shy in large groups, would give answers to her classmate in Spanish, who would then translate them into English for the class. "We don't want to stifle her interaction with the large group," she says. The shy student should also be encouraged to participate directly in small groups as a way to build up her confidence, she adds.

"I can't stress enough the need for collaboration between mainstream teachers and ESL teachers," says Pappamihiel. This collaboration is important to understanding each student's "comfort zone" in using English.

Such cooperation is the goal of many programs involving diverse students. In Fairfax County, Va., where students represent more than 100 native languages, joint responsibility for English language learners is emphasized, says Francisco Millet, director of the district's English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program. Collaboration time is built into the weekly schedule for teachers to work together on grades and schedules and to decide when to transfer students out of the ESOL program. Staff development for all teachers includes strategies for differentiating instruction. Today, "the only certainty that teachers have is that there will be a mix of students—of cultures, languages, and ability levels," Millet explains.

Difficulties vs. Disabilities

A recurring issue recognized by educators around the country in regard to English language learners is that they tend to be overrepresented in special education settings, often because of poor placement. Fairfax County, which has a smaller percentage of ESL students in special education than the national average, takes time to determine that the placement "is not a language issue," says Millet.

Under its Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Exceptional Students (CLiDES) program, the county brings ESOL, special education, and general education staff together with administrators, parents, and counselors to create a system of checks and balances that reduces inappropriate placements. The program includes the following:

- **Prereferral intervention.** Current and home country school records and medical history are reviewed. Parents are involved in the process, with interpreters available for assistance (if necessary).
- **Dual-language assessment.** As a last step before a special education referral, a bilingual team determines whether a student's skills and literacy are dominant in the home language or in English. Team members then determine the student's English proficiency.
- **Culturally competent assessment.** Items with a cultural bias are eliminated from assessment tools, and an interpreter is used (as needed) in conducting assessments.
- **Conclusions drawn from a variety of tests.** Collaboration between special education and ESOL teachers continues as they work together to select and administer appropriate speech/language tests and social and psychological assessments.

"These are all necessary, otherwise we're jumping the gun. We just want to reduce the possibility of making mistakes," says Berthica Rodriguez-McCleary, CLiDES director and dual language lead teacher. ► continued on page 8

Entrées to English

Tips for Assisting Language Learners

Judith Lessow-Hurley, an elementary education professor at San Jose State University, offers the following strategies for teachers:

- **Engage cooperative groups of English language learners (ELLs) and English speakers in common tasks.** This gives students a meaningful context for using English.
- **Develop content around a theme.** The repetition of vocabulary and concepts reinforces language and ideas and gives ELLs better access to content.
- **Allow students nonverbal ways to demonstrate knowledge and comprehension.** For example, one teacher has early primary students hold up cardboard "lollipops" (green or red side forward) to indicate "Yes" or "No" to questions.
- **Don't constantly correct students' departure from Standard English.** It's better to get students talking; they acquire accepted forms through regular use and practice. A teacher can always paraphrase a student's answer to model Standard English.
- **Consider using visual aids and hands-on activities to deliver content.** Information is better retained when a variety of senses are called upon.
- **Use routines as a way to reinforce language.** This practice increases the comfort level of second language learners; they then know what to expect and associate the routine with the language.

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"It's important to distinguish between a language difference—or difficulty—and a language disability."

Rodriguez-McCleary calls the widespread collaboration in Fairfax County a "paradigm shift." Historically, the fields of ESL and special education have moved along separate paths. That approach is "old fashioned and limited," she says. "These children belong to all teachers."

"We see our language minority students as an asset," says Rodriguez-McCleary, "therefore, we want to give them absolutely everything they need to be successful."

Two-Way Immersion

One way to appreciate the benefits of language diversity and help English language learners is through a two-way immersion program, which provides a half day of instruction in English and a half day in the minority language. English speakers learn a foreign language, and English language learners keep their first language and strengthen English skills. The goal is for all children to become bilingual.

In Arlington, Va., Francis Scott Key Elementary School has become a model of a whole-school two-way immersion program. Classrooms are made up of 50 percent each native English speakers and Spanish speakers. Math and science instruction is in Spanish; social studies and language arts classes are conducted in English.

Dual-language programs like Key's have advantages over bilingual programs, according to researchers. The most common type of bilingual program offers content classes in a native language combined with daily ESL instruction over a two- to four-year period. Students eventually progress to full-fledged classes in English. The problem with bilingual programs is that students are not learning academic English, says Deborah Short of the Center for Applied Linguistics. This may not be an issue in elementary school, but it increasingly becomes a problem after 4th grade as demands increase on students' abilities to read and write in English.

The two-way program gives the native Spanish speakers "a time to shine" in the classroom, says Key Elementary principal Marjorie Myers. There's no "earning" a way into the mainstream classroom because "at Key, everybody is 'in,' and every single child at this school is learning a language," Myers emphasizes. Students are doing extremely well on standardized tests, she adds.

A Multilingual Future?

Expanding Educational Opportunity in Linguistically Diverse Societies, a recent report by the Center for Applied Linguistics, takes many countries to task because they fail to recognize the importance of using a child's first language as a means of instruction. The report cites one U.S. study that shows "students performed better on tests in high school if they had some mother tongue instruction in elementary school than they did if they were in all-English programs."

Although a lack of resources or a shortage of bilingual teachers can make effective instruction difficult, many educators agree that students need instruction in their first language to gain a foothold in literacy and basic commerce with the wider world. With the English-only movement, English language learners get programs of submersion versus immersion as they flounder in incomprehension, insists Lessow-Hurley. As diversity among the U.S. population continues to increase and Spanish-speaking school-age youth predominate in many communities, educators may need to rethink how incorporating other languages in the classroom can ultimately support both the English-learning process and overall school achievement.

—Rick Allen

What Are You Thinking?

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